DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 024 JC 920 473

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TITLE Strengthening Humanities at Genesee Community College: An NEH-Funded Faculty Development Grant.
INSTITUTION Genesee Community Coll., Batavia, N.Y.
SPONS AGENCY National Endowment for the Humanities (NFAH), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE [92]
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Faculty; Communication (Thought Transfer); Community Colleges; Educational Media; *Faculty Development; History; *Humanities; Humanities Instruction; *Hypermedia; Instructional Improvement; Liberal Arts; *Microcomputers; Seminars; Summer Programs; Teacher Workshops; Two Year Colleges; Vocational Education; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Genesee Community College NY; Historical Analysis

ABSTRACT

Genesee Community College (GCC), in New York, received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to conduct a faculty seminar focusing on the role and historical context of the computer as a medium for writing. Twenty GCC faculty from the humanities, as well as from career/technical programs, participated in the seminar in the summer of 1992. During the first week, faculty explored hypertext, a form that transcends the linear, bounded, and fixed qualities of the traditional written text. For two days faculty (many of whom had no prior computer experience) had hands-on experience in the computer lab, where they built rudimentary hypertexts that might be used in their classes. In the second week, a historical examination of human communication commenced, ranging from oral cultures predating the written word to cultures of the Middle Ages. During the third week, faculty investigated collections of knowledge, the printing revolution of modern Europe, artificial intelligence, and interactive fiction. Participants also viewed medieval manuscripts and codices at Cornell University, and the films "2001: A Space Odyssey" and "2010." The fourth week was devoted to the Electronic Age, including explorations of print forerunners to electronic text, interactive fiction in a computer lab, the effect of television on communication, virtual reality technology, and cultural literacy. Following the seminar, GCC sponsored a national telephone conference to share the experience with other colleges. (MAB)

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STRENGTHENING HUMANITIES AT GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

AN NEH-FUNDED FACULTY DEVELOPMENT GRANT

by

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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STRENGTHENING HUMANITIES AT GENESEE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

AN NEH-FUNDED FACULTY DEVELOPMENT GRANT

Unfortunately, the trend in higher education towards stratification of learning has encouraged few to pursue the humanities and enjoy the benefits of a broadened personal perspective. Many have selected a narrower educational track oriented toward the development of specific skill and expertise. Students at Genesee Community College in Batavia, New York have been victims of this trend. Over the past decade, humanities offerings have declined, while enrollments in career programs have surged. In addition, as at many other community colleges, faculty at G.C.C. teach at least 15 hours a semester and consequently have little time for professional development. Another consequence of the heavy teaching load is that there is little time for interaction with faculty from other disciplines. As a result, we felt there was need to build bridges between the professors in the humanities and those teaching in the career education or technical fields and to provide them with an opportunity for professional enrichment.

To address these problems, the college in the fall semester of 1989 applied for an "Advancing the Humanities" grant, which was jointly sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Association of Community and Junior Colleges. We learned that we were awarded the grant, and in April 1990 two faculty members, one from humanities and one from computer science, and an administrator met at Airlie House near Washington, D.C. with teams from the other colleges which received similar grants. Each team was assigned a mentor--someone who had successfully directed an NEH grant. During the conference we developed an action plan which would culminate in our submission of a grant proposal to the NEH.

In the fall, we visited Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa

to confer with Robert Sessions and Joseph Collins, whose NEH grant had enabled them to hold summer seminars and to develop several new courses. Following that visit, we selected two topics of interest, mythology and writing technologies, and chose scholars who would lead us in our study. With their help we developed a bibliography and wrote a grant proposal to the NEH.

In March 1991 we submitted our proposal and learned in September that we had been awarded a grant. However, not all that we had proposed was funded. Only one of the two summer seminars was approved, that dealing with the technologies of writing. The segment of the summer study during which we had proposed to develop new courses also was not funded, but we were to have a seminar in the summer of 1992.

During the fall and spring semesters of 1991-1992 we assembled a team of faculty who were interested in studying together. This team included professors from English, art, Spanish, accounting, travel and tourism, computer science, office technology, marketing, education, psychology, political science and two librarians. We also met several times, including once with our scholar, Dr. Jay David Bolter of Georgia Institute of Technology. We began our reading of the nearly 20 books and articles Dr.Bolter had suggested, and we made last minute plans for the seminar, including arrangements for meeting off-campus, a most important part of the experience.

Finally it was June, 1992, and the seminar was here. Our goal was to examine the computer as a medium of writing and to set this new medium in its historical context. During the first week, we spent two days discussing two readings, Pamela McCorduck's <u>The Universal Machine</u> and selected articles from <u>Hypermedia and Literary Studies</u>, edited by Paul DeLaney and George Landow. Norm Gayford, co-coordinator, led these discussions which helped us to come to a better understanding of the concept of hypertext. For those who are not familiar

with hypertext, it is the use of the computer to transcend the linear, bounded, fixed qualities of the traditional written text. Hypertext can be composed and read non-sequentially and allows collaborative authorship and annotation. The third and fourth days we met in the computer labs at the college, and Norm and Donna Ehrhart, the two coordinators, helped us to build rudimentary hypertexts that might be usable in our classes. One day we worked with Word Perfect and the next with Harvard Graphics. It is important to note that in our group of 20 there were a number who had NEVER used a computer and a number more who had had only slight exposure. By the end of those hands-on days, everyone was feeling very confident and very excited about the possibilities that hypertext offers for classroom use. In fact, three of us were sent as a delegation to the vice president, requesting that those of us involved in the seminar be given first opportunity for computers on our desks as they become available.

Week two brought us our scholar, Dr. Jay David Bolter from Georgia Tech and author of Writing Space, a text which clearly defines what literacy means in an electronic age, and also author (if that's the right word) of the computer program Storyspace, which facilitates the writing of hypertext and interactive fiction. Dr. Bolter took us back to the beginnings of human communication and the oral cultures which preceded the written word. We discussed Walter Ong's Orality and Literacy, The Technologizing of the Word and Homer's Iliad. The second day we moved on to writing and its impact on human communication, discussing Albertine Gaur's A History of Writing and sections of Dr. Bolter's book. Day three we dealt with Greek literacy, discussing Plato's Phaedrus and The Republic and Aristotle's The Poetics. Day four we moved through history to medieval manuscripts, examining J.J.G. Alexander's The Decorated Letter and Gellrich's The Idea of the Book in the Middle Ages.

The third week we examined Grolier's Electronic Encyclopedia, the Video

Encyclopedia of the 20th Century and the Encyclopedia Britannica after having talked about earlier collections of knowledge. On campus we also viewed a videotape of a portion of the Kubrik film 2001: A Space Odyssey and a short segment from 2010 in preparation for our discussion of artificial intelligence later in the week. Tuesday we traveled to Cornell University, where Nancy Kaplan had arranged a wonderful exhibit of medieval manuscripts and codices. Seeing the illuminations of those manuscripts and the very early books was a wonderful way for us to realize the differences between reading then and now. The third day we discussed The Printing Revolution in Modern Europe by Elizabeth Eisenstein noting the monumental changes in the world following the invention of movable type. Day four we spent the morning discussing artificial intelligence, using Arthur C. Clarke's 2001: A Space Odyssey and Bolter's Writing Space as texts. In the afternoon we were joined by Michael Joyce, one of the authors of the interactive fiction we would be reading the next week. He defined interactive fiction for us and explained how he had come to write Afternoon. He also led us in a discussion of the ways in which teaching will have to change as books become electronic instead of paper.

During week four we returned to the electronic age we had studied in the first week. On Monday we talked about print forerunners of electronic literature, including Jorge Luis Borges' Ficciones, Sterne's Tristram Shandy, Cortazar's Hopscotch and Pavec's Dictionary of the Khazars. It was interesting to see print authors struggling to overcome the bounds imposed by the print medium. We met Monday and Tuesday at a high school computer lab which has networked Macintosh computers. G.C.C. has wonderful computer facilities but has committed to IBM or IBM-compatible, and most interactive fiction is written for Apple products. At the lab we were able to read in Victory Garden by Stuart Moulthrop and/or Afternoon by Michael Joyce. It was an interesting experience

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reading fiction which is different for each reader. We continued our reading on Tuesday and were joined by the author of Victory Garden, who answered our questions as we read, explained the structure of the fiction, talked about the writing process and was generally very helpful in guiding us through his work. The group's reactions included those who found it physically uncomfortable to read at the computer screen, those who wanted closure (which hypertext doesn't bring), those who were totally fascinated by the idea of shaping the story by the choices they made, etc. Most of us found it interesting but were pretty sure we don't want all books to be electronic. Wednesday we spent discussing television's impact on communication and on our society, using the texts Amusing Ourselves to Death by Neil Postman and Marshall McLuhan's Understanding Media. Our final morning we talked about virtual reality, a computer technology that fools the senses into thinking you're in an environment other than where you really are. This technology may have implications for education. Our final afternoon we devoted to a discussion of cultural literacy, using a variety of texts: Robert Scholes' "Aiming a Canon at the Curriculum," E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy, Allan Bloom's The Closing of the American Mind, Alvin Kernan's The Death of Literature and O.B. Hardison's Disappearing Through the Skylight.

Our goals were fulfilled beyond our expectations. All the participants noted in their evaluation forms how meaningful the study had been, how intellectually stimulating they found the seminar. To quote one of the participants: "My mind still works (I have discovered)!" And another said, "The excitement was there in the earliest session....From the first session excitement coupled with intellectual stimulation--and it got better! Each day the seminar became more rewarding--FULFILLED YES!"

The objective of bridging the gap between the humanities and career/technical faculty was also successfully achieved. We came to respect each

other's strengths and perspectives on how and what we teach. Again, quotes from participants explain: "The seminar has fulfilled my expectations by bringing together a group of people who demonstrate that there is a 'life of the mind' at G.C.C. Intelligent discussion of basic issues central to education in an electronic-media environment is necessary." And another said: "...the seminar provided for me to get to know my colleagues better. For me this experience renewed a wonderul sense of collegiality and excitement about learning which existed in the early days of G.C.C.

The grant period ended with our sponsoring a national telephone conference to share our experience with other colleges which might be interested in pursuing some of the same concepts to alleviate similar problems.

Thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities and to Dr. Jay David Bolter, 20 faculty members at G.C.C. have returned to the classroom filled with enthusiasm, new knowledge, and new techniques for teaching.